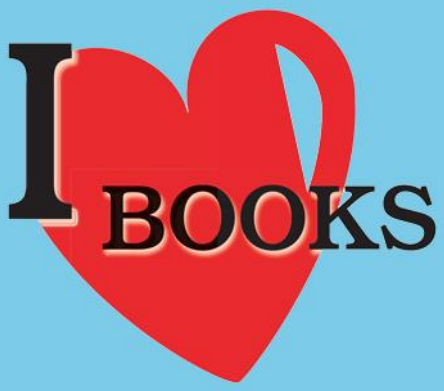


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Opening extract from

Rosie Goes to War

Written by

Alison Knight

Published by

Accent Press Ltd

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Published by Accent Press Ltd

ISBN 9781783752515

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Accent Press Ltd, Ty Cynon House, Navigation Park, Abercynon CF45 4SN

Published by Accent Press Ltd – 2016

CHAPTER ONE

Mum can never understand why I don't like going to Gran's house. She doesn't see the shadows, or hear the whispers. She says I'm just being stroppy, and I don't respect the older generation. But it isn't that at all. Gran's cool. She laughs a lot, she's addicted to her telly, and doesn't mind if I stay up late. And, she doesn't nag.

Seriously, I love my Gran, but her house gives me the creeps. Sometimes, it's like there's two houses in one place. The one everyone sees is sunny and warm, full of plants and family photos and odd cooking smells. The other one, that's hiding inside it, is dingy and cold, where there are other people just out of sight. You can hear them in the next room, or see them out of the corner of your eye. At least, I can. Mum can't. And if Gran notices, it doesn't seem to bother her.

'Mind the wind don't change while you've got that sour look on your face, our Rosie,' says Gran, plonking down a mug of tea in front of me, 'or you'll be stuck that like for ever. You won't get no handsome boys chasing after you then.'

I feel myself go red at Gran's words. 'Boys don't chase after me,' I say. 'They like girls with big boobs,' I say, thinking of some people I know from school. Oh my God! Did I just say that to my gran?

'Not much change there then,' laughs Gran. 'It was the same when I was a girl. Mind you, the war changed all that. Them lads in uniform were happy for some attention from anything in a skirt. Frightened, they were, that Hitler would do for 'em before they got into a girl's knickers. I was fighting them all off in the end, 'cept my Billy of course. God rest his soul.'

'Too much information, thanks.' I just can't picture my grandmother as a girl. I mean, she's in her nineties – although, as Dad always says, pretty spry. Still, it's really old. Eewww!

‘Don’t you go all prissy on me, our Rosie. I know what it’s like to be fifteen.’

I try not to roll my eyes.

‘I was working by then,’ Gran goes on. ‘After our mum died, me and Nelly had the house to ourselves, what with Dad being away in the war. Had some adventures, we did. Nelly’ll tell you when she gets here. We didn’t sit around sulking because there weren’t no interweb.’

Huh! Gran and her sister had it all right then – no school, and no parents telling them they’re not old enough to be left alone for a few weeks, which I am, I don’t care what Mum says.

Not that it matters where I am this summer: it’s still going to be worst one ever. I wanted to go on holiday with my bestie, or rather ex-bestie Jessica. Her family’s staying in a villa with a pool in Italy. They’d invited me to go with them, and it was going to be great because her brother Luke was going with his mate Simon, who I’ve fancied just about all my life. I saved up and bought a sexy bikini that was guaranteed to impress him.

Then what happens? I catch Jess snogging Simon. Yeah, really. I mean, she’s always known how I feel about him. How could she do that to me? And I can’t believe he is so shallow that he’s snogged her when he was pretending he was interested in me just a couple of days before. I’m not sure I want a boyfriend who plays around like that. And then I had the embarrassment of Luke asking me out. I mean seriously – Jessie’s brother? I’ve known him for ever, he’s like a brother to me. He was probably motivated by pity anyway, but it was really awkward, turning him down. I couldn’t go on holiday with them after that, could I? I told Mum and Dad I’d stay at home.

But no, my parents are off on a jolly to France because Dad’s got to fix a computer system that’s playing up over there, and they reckon I’m too young to stay home alone and made me come to Gran’s instead. It’s so not fair! And now her scary sister Nelly is coming to stay too. It just gets worse and worse.

‘It’s the internet, Gran,’ I say. ‘And I’m not sulking.’ Well, maybe I am, but I reckon I’ve got reason to. ‘I’m just bored, that’s all. If you had proper Wi-Fi I could talk to my friends.’ I

can't use my mobile, because I stupidly forgot to pack the charger. I'll have to go out and buy another one soon. The battery's nearly dead and I'll die if I can't text anyone.

'Well I haven't, and I'm jolly glad. You ought to be out and about, making new friends, not sitting here all pale and quiet. In my day, we made our own entertainment.'

Here we go again. Another lecture on the good old days.

'I'd be up town, going to the picture-house, or to see a show. If me old knees weren't so bad, I'd go with you now. Loved it up town, I did.'

Gran always calls central London 'up town'. I quite fancy going there myself. Jess went to Covent Garden once, and she said it was wicked, with street performers and nice shops and stuff. I won't admit it to Gran, but I'm a bit scared of getting buses on my own. So I shrug, playing it cool. 'It's not the same these days. I'd probably get mugged.'

'Gor blimey! What's the matter with you? I've never in all my days been mugged, and I reckon them toe-rags what do that sort of thing will pick on the likes of me, not you. The cowardly little so-and-so's will go for the easy target, not a fit young thing who can scream and beat 'em off.'

'If someone comes after me with a knife, Gran, I'll just hand over my purse and phone. Nothing's worth getting killed for.'

'Neither is it right to give in to the likes of them. If you don't do nothing else, my girl, you run. You've got a good pair of long legs on you, and most of them muggers are drugged up or drunk, so you'll leave 'em standing.'

I laugh. 'How did we go from me being bored to dealing with muggers?'

'Well, I dunno. Something to do with you being too scared to leave the house, I think.' Gran's eyes twinkle behind her purple-rimmed glasses. 'So, are you getting the bus up town or not?'

She's got me. 'I suppose so. But didn't you say you wanted me to help you this morning?'

Gran looks confused for a minute. She does that a lot. Then she tuts.

''Course I did. It won't take long. We need to sort out

Nelly's room before she gets here.'

It looks like Gran has been using her sister's old room as a dump – there's stuff everywhere. It's probably quite big when you clear all the junk out. But right now it's making me feel weird. The sun's shining through the window, but it's freezing in here. One minute there's wallpaper with little lemon flowers on. The next, I swear, it all merges into plain, dingy, green paint. It's making me feel dizzy.

'What's the matter with the walls?' I ask.

'What walls, love?'

'There.' I point at a spot of dark green that looks like a big smudge on the pale wallpaper.

Gran peers at it, scrunching up her eyes, then she shrugs and shakes her head. 'I can't see nothing, darling. Is there an air bubble under the paper?'

I rub my eyes. Maybe I've got something wrong with my sight? I don't think so, though. I had my usual eye-test not long ago and I'm fine. I look at Gran, wondering if she's in denial. After all, it can't be easy, living in this house. It's beyond weird. 'Must have been something in my eye,' I say. 'So what do we need to do?'

'That'll be all the dust in here,' says Gran. 'I'd better get the Hoover.'

'I'll get it,' I say, glad to get out of here for a minute.

'Oh, ta. Get the Pledge and a couple of dusters while you're at it, love.'

'OK.' I run downstairs, trying to think up excuses to stay out of there.

It takes us an hour to sort out the room, which behaves itself for once and looks like normal. When most of the junk has been put away, it's quite nice. The wallpaper is pretty, in a vintage sort of way. The pale lemon curtains match the cover Gran throws over the duvet. I'm just straightening it for her when I stub my toe on something under the bed.

'Ow!' I hop around a bit, the pain bringing tears to my eyes. Gran fusses over me until I get embarrassed and calm down. I

lift up the corner of the bedcover and glare at the object that attacked me. It's a suitcase – brown leather, dead old looking.

'What you got there, love? Let's have a look.' I pick it up – Oh my God, it's heavy – and put it on the bed.

Gran looks at the label. 'Well, I never did. I forgot all about her.'

Before I can ask what she means, the doorbell rings and Nelly arrives.

I must stop calling my great-aunt that. It's Gran's fault. She always calls her Nelly, even though her sister doesn't like it. I don't see her much, but I remember the last time I did. She told me off: 'My name is Eleanor,' she'd said, looking down her nose at me. 'Only my foolish sister insists on using that ridiculous nickname.' It made me feel stupid, like when Mrs Sparks, my History teacher, tells me off for not paying attention – which happens a lot. I suppose it's not surprising that Great-aunt Ne … Eleanor used to be a head teacher at a huge school in London. She probably trained at the same place as Mrs Sparks. They're both seriously scary.

I volunteer to put the kettle on. I'm a bit shy round Great-aunt Eleanor. She's quite posh, not like Gran. It's hard to see that they're sisters, really. I use the cups and saucers instead of mugs, find some biscuits, and put it all on a nice tray to take into the lounge, where they're talking.

'Here she is, Nelly, hasn't she grown?'

I put the tray down on the coffee table and wish Gran would stop embarrassing me. Of course I've grown – last time Great-aunt Eleanor saw me, I was about ten. I'm nearly sixteen now.

'Oh, you've forgotten the sugar, love,' said Gran.

I always forget the sugar – no one takes it our house. 'Sorry. I'll get it.'

'No, you sit down and talk to your auntie. I'll get it.' Gran leaves us to it.

Great-aunt Eleanor doesn't say anything at first, she just looks at me all funny. I'm starting to wonder whether I've got a spot on my nose or something.

'You're Rosie. May's granddaughter.' she says at last.

‘Yes.’

‘You remind me of someone.’

Gran comes in the with sugar bowl.

‘Who does she look like, May?’

‘Well, she’s got her dad’s colouring – brown hair, green eyes. But she don’t really look like him.’

Eleanor is staring at me with that funny look again. ‘That’s not what I mean,’ she says. ‘There’s something very familiar about her, but I can’t put my finger on it. It is very annoying.’

Gran peers at me, puzzled. Then she shakes her head and puts a hand to her mouth. ‘What am I thinking? I forgot the spoons. We can’t have no sugar if we ain’t got no spoons.’

I laugh as Gran goes off to the get them. What is she like?

Eleanor carries on frowning at me, so I stop laughing. She’s really freaking me out. I resist the urge to check my nose. Instead I check my teeth with my tongue, in case there’s something stuck there. But it feels like I’m sticking my tongue out at her without opening my mouth, which must look rude, so I stop.

Between the two sisters, I’d have said that Gran looked like the crazy one, with her purple glasses, matching blouse and silver dangly earrings. Apparently she used to have dark hair like mine, but hers is just a ball of silver frizz now. On the other hand, Great-aunt Eleanor is the complete opposite – gold-rimmed half-moon glasses perched on her nose, her white hair pulled back into a tight bun, and a single, neat string of pearls over a lavender twin-set. Yep, definitely scary.

‘Here we are,’ Gran comes in with the teaspoons. I breathe a sigh of relief as she takes the attention off me.

While they chat, I’m thinking I should be able to escape soon. I still have to get a new phone charger, so that’s a good excuse to go out. I hope old Nelly won’t stay long if she’s going to stare at me like that all the time. It’s a bit rude, really. I’d be in loads of trouble if I did it. I must remember to call her Great-aunt Eleanor as well, otherwise I’ll be for it, like last time. Just as I’m psyching myself up to interrupt them, Gran spoils it by pointing at me.

‘Our Rosie’s doing ever so well at school, Nelly. She’s

doing loads of them GCSEs. I reckon she's got your brains.'

'Gran,' I say. 'It's no big deal.' Oh God, this is so embarrassing. I do all right at school, but I'm not one of the nerdy girls who are going to get all A-stars or anything.

'Do you like school?' asks Great-aunt Eleanor.

'Yeah, it's OK,' I say, sounding a bit sulky. I hate the way she's looking at me, like she's going to give me a test or something. 'I'll probably stay on for A-levels.' But only because I don't know what else to do.

Gran is ever so impressed. 'Good for you, girl. You'll go far, like Nelly. Me, I was glad to leave school. I never was much cop at lessons. Nelly hated having to leave school at fourteen, didn't you, love?'

Great-aunt Eleanor nods.

'But our poor old Dad couldn't afford to keep her there after Mum died,' Gran went on. 'He needed Nelly out earning, to help pay the bills. She got her qualifications after the war. Did evening classes, didn't you?'

Again, Great-aunt Eleanor nods, then takes a sip of her tea, her little finger raised, like she's having tea with the Queen.

Gran is on a roll now. 'In them days there wasn't much money about – you've heard of the Great Depression, have you?' I haven't, but before I can say so, Gran goes on. 'Before the war, there was so many men out of work.' She shakes her head, looking all tragic. 'That's why our dad joined the Merchant Navy. It meant leaving us girls on our own, but it was steady money and he got fed and watered while he was at sea. That's how he managed to pay for this house. Reckoned it was a good thing to own the roof over your head. 'Course, we nearly lost it in the Blitz, didn't we, Nelly?'

I nibble on a biscuit, not knowing what to say. I can normally talk to Gran, no problem. But her sister's too scary. But good old Gran likes to chat, so she just carries on.

'Ooh, Nelly, I nearly forgot. You'll never guess what me and Rosie found under your old bed upstairs.'

'I suppose I won't,' she says, lifting her cup to her lips. 'So why don't you tell me?'

'Queenie's suitcase!' said Gran.

Great-aunt Eleanor blinks. Then she very carefully lowers her cup back onto the saucer, and puts them both on the coffee table. ‘It’s still here? I thought we’d thrown it out years ago.’

‘I know you wanted to,’ says Gran. ‘But don’t you remember? Bill said we couldn’t chuck it out because it wasn’t ours. He reckoned she might come back for it one day.’

‘That’s ridiculous. Even if she survived the bombing, she’d never have come back. Not after what she did.’

This is getting interesting. ‘Who’s Queenie?’ I ask.

‘A spy,’ says Great-aunt Eleanor.

‘No,’ says Gran, smiling. ‘She was a bit odd – downright daft sometimes – but she couldn’t have been a spy. She was a girl who stayed with us for a bit in the war.’

‘She wasn’t as stupid as she appeared. I think she was very cunning. She was far too vague about where she came from, and she disappeared without a trace.’

Gran sighs. ‘The poor girl didn’t stand a chance. We should never have let her go out on her own that night. ‘

‘It was her own fault,’ says her sister. ‘She managed to upset everyone. I’m sure it was deliberate. I’m convinced she’d completed whatever mission she had, and used our argument as an excuse to escape back to wherever she’d come from.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake,’ Gran laughs. ‘What good would a fifteen-year-old girl be as a spy? There weren’t no war secrets in our house.’

‘No, indeed, but she came to work with us at the factory, didn’t she? She could have been spying there.’

‘Blimey, Nelly, what would Hitler have needed to know about the seams on sailors’ trousers? Their inside-leg measurements? She never got good enough to do more than the basic stuff.’

Great-aunt Eleanor sniffs. I try not to smile. This is great. Whoever Queenie was, she’d caused a stir.

‘Maybe not,’ Great-aunt Eleanor goes on. ‘But she certainly got friendly with the young men around here, in and out of uniform, as you well know.’

Gran tuts and waves a hand at her sister. ‘Are you still cross about that? After all these years? Come on, love, I’m sure she

didn't mean no harm. It all worked out in the end, didn't it?'

'What happened?' I ask.

'She stole her man,' Great-aunt Eleanor points at Gran.

Gran laughs. 'Oh, God help us. She did me a favour. Besides, it was seventy-odd years ago, Nell. It's all water under the bridge. Here, Rosie, nip up and bring that suitcase down, love. We'll have a look.'

CHAPTER TWO

I run upstairs for the suitcase. As I go into the bedroom to get it, the walls start doing their funny stuff again. The bedcover is dark red now, and there's brown lino on the floor instead of the beige carpet. But the case is still there on the bed, so I grab it. I nearly fall down the stairs rushing to get back to Gran and normality.

Great-aunt Eleanor opens the case. Inside are clothes, shoes, a gas mask, and some old notebooks. Gran picks up a buff-coloured booklet.

'Ooh, look! It's an old ration book. I don't miss the food from them days, do you, Nelly? There was hardly anything nice in the shops, and what you got wasn't enough to keep a mouse fed. We had no trouble keeping our figures, did we?' She pats her belly. 'Now we can eat what we like, we always have to watch the scales.'

'You're not fat, Gran,' I laugh. I hope I'll be like Gran, but it's not likely, worse luck. I'm already taller than her. I'll probably end up more like Mum's side of the family. They're what Dad calls 'substantial women'.

'I'm not as skinny as I used to be, our Rosie. Like a stick insect, I was. No curves, just straight up and down.'

'And what you lacked in inches, you made up for in chatter,' says Eleanor. 'What else have you got there, May?' She rummages in the suitcase and finds some papers. I reckon that woman needs to chill out. Doesn't she ever smile?

The papers don't look very interesting. I'd rather look at the clothes. They're all neatly folded, and some of them are wrapped in tissue paper.

I take out a pretty blue cardigan. I'm careful, because I'm worried it might fall to bits since it's been in that suitcase for so long. It was obviously hand-knitted, and has some lovely pearl

buttons. It feels so soft, but it smells so horrible it makes me cough.

'Eeoogh, that stinks!'

'Mothballs,' says Great-aunt Eleanor, still looking at the papers.

'They keep the bugs out, love,' says Gran. 'These are good quality clothes and mothballs keep 'em safe. Otherwise the moths'll eat their way through this lot.'

I shiver at the thought of insects crawling around in the suitcase

'Right. Nice.'

I lay the cardigan carefully over the back of a chair, and pick up the next thing – an old-fashioned cotton nightdress. It's white, with tiny flowers embroidered in pinks and purples around the neckline. It stinks as well, but I turn my head away, and take a deep breath before I hold it up against me. It covers me from neck to toe.

'Oh, wow! Did people really wear stuff like this?' I ask.

Gran smiles and nods. 'Ah, that's lovely,' she says. 'And cosy too. We didn't have no central heating back then. A nice long nighty was just the thing to keep your bum from getting frostbite.'

'Gran!' I laugh. What is she like?

'Well, it's true. Blooming freezing, this old house was. We had big candlewick dressing gowns too, and bed socks. Didn't we, Nell?'

'Mmm?' Great-aunt Eleanor was busy studying the papers, but looked up when Gran said her name. 'Bed socks. Yes.'

She's staring at me again. I feel cold all of a sudden. I turn round and stuff the nightdress back into the case.

Gran tuts. 'No, come here, Rosie. Don't do it like that, love. Let me fold it proper.' She picks it up and sorts it out. But before she puts it back she gets all the other stuff out. 'You should try some of these on.' She picks up a tweed skirt, shakes the creases out and passes it to me. 'I reckon they're about your size.'

I hold the skirt against me. It's a lot longer than I usually wear, ending below my knees.

‘An excellent idea,’ says Great-aunt Eleanor. ‘I believe the fashion these days is for “retro.”’ She makes quote marks in the air. ‘Your grandmother will be able to style your hair as well.’

Gran nods, clapping her hands together. ‘Ooh, yes! I used to love hairdressing, didn’t I, Nelly? With all that long dark hair, I can give you some really fancy do’s. It’ll be fun.’

I’m not so sure. This feels freaky. ‘Actually, it’s vintage.’ I say. ‘And it’s not my sort of thing, thanks.’

Gran looks disappointed, making me feel mean. I really don’t want to play dressing up with a load of old clothes. But I don’t want to upset Gran either. Great-aunt Eleanor just looks annoyed.

‘Nonsense,’ she says. ‘Just about everything you young girls wear these days is a copy of fashions your mothers wore in the 60s and 70s. You might at least try these on.’

I want to stick my tongue out at her for real now, but don’t dare. Instead, I bite my lip. It just feels wrong, that’s all.

‘You don’t have to if you don’t want to, love,’ says Gran, making me feel even worse. What else can I do?

‘Oh, all right,’ I say. ‘I’ll give it a go.’

Immediately, Gran cheers up, and old Nelly nods, satisfied. I pick up a pale pink blouse to go with the skirt. With any luck they won’t fit.

The skirt and blouse do fit, perfectly. I can’t believe it. I go and show the old women, trying not to gag as I get a waft of *Eau de Mothballs* as I move. They’re in the kitchen, brewing more tea. Gran fusses over me, while Great-aunt Eleanor watches, all narrow-eyed. I pretend not to notice, because she’s freaking me out again. The sooner I can get my jeans back on, the better.

‘Come on then,’ says Gran, ‘Let’s do your hair. It’s a shame I got rid of me old curlers. I could’ve made you look like a film star.’

I sit on the kitchen chair that Gran has put in the middle of the room and let her fuss. Her hands are a lot stronger than I expect, and I can’t help yelping in pain as she yanks a comb through my hair and sticks it with a shed-load of pins.

‘Sorry, love. Nearly there.’

‘Here,’ says Great-aunt Eleanor. ‘Put these on.’ She kneels down, quite flexible considering how old she is, and slides some shoes onto my feet. Again, a perfect fit. I shiver and the walls of the kitchen wobble for a second then go back to normal. This is getting really weird. Or maybe Gran’s been overdoing the hair pulling a bit and my eyes have gone wonky. I lift up my feet to get a look at the shoes. Black leather, plain like a court shoe, chunky heel. Not my usual style.

At last Gran is satisfied, and I’m allowed to stand up. The heels on the shoes are quite high, and I wobble a bit as I walk into the hall to look at myself in the big mirror on the coat stand. The silky lining of the skirt rustles against my legs as I move, and the heels make me walk differently. It feels quite sexy.

The old women follow me. I smile as I imagine walking down a catwalk, with loads of people watching and thinking how gorgeous I am. Yeah, right.

‘Wow!’ I look like someone out of a black-and-white film! My hair, which is usually frizzy as anything, looks great. I put a hand up and feel how smooth it is.

‘That’s a French pleat,’ says Gran. ‘Very elegant.’

The clothes, which still smell of those awful mothballs, give me some curves. I look about twenty-five, in a vintage, Paloma Faith kind of way.

Gran and Great-aunt Eleanor crowd behind me at the mirror. But when I look at our reflection, I don’t see two old women. Instead there are two girls, one blonde, one dark, and both are dressed like me. My mouth drops open, I can feel my heart start to race. It’s impossible. It’s like looking through a window, except I can still see myself clearly reflected, right between them.

‘You need a bit of red lipstick,’ says the dark girl.

I blink. The girls disappear, and Gran’s smiling at me in the mirror where the dark girl stood. Great-aunt Eleanor is glaring at me from where the blonde was. I blink again and for a split second the girls are there, and I want to scream but I can’t, and before I can do anything they morph back into Gran and Eleanor.

‘Ooh, don’t you look lovely!’ Gran coos.

I’m too shocked to say anything at first, then I just blurt out, ‘Red lipstick?’

‘Yes, love. I used to have a lovely one from Max Factor,’ says Gran. ‘It would’ve been perfect.’

Great-aunt Eleanor jumps, like she’s had electric shock or something.

‘That’s it!’ says Great-aunt Eleanor. ‘Of course!’

‘Ooh, that’s a good idea,’ says Gran. ‘I might still have some somewhere.’

I look sideways at Gran. She can’t be serious. I doubt if she’s worn red lipstick in my lifetime. I dread to think what sort of bacteria might be growing on some old tube she’s had for years.

‘Perhaps not,’ I say.

‘Well, if you’re sure?’ she says. ‘I could probably find it.’

‘For goodness sake, May,’ Great-aunt Eleanor snaps.

I look at her reflection, relieved she’s not gone blonde again. Did Eleanor see the girls as well? Before I get a chance to ask her, she gets a hard look in her eyes and pokes me in the back.

‘Hey!’

‘Nelly!’ Gran looks shocked.

‘I knew it,’ says Great-aunt Eleanor. ‘So you’re back, are you? I don’t know how you did it, but you’ve got a lot of explaining to do, young lady.’

I shake my head, unable to speak as my throat has closed up. I’m feeling dizzy and think I’m going to pass out. I’m too frightened to blink again in case those girls come back, so I must be looking a bit googly-eyed but I can’t help myself.

‘What are you on about, Nelly?’ asks Gran. ‘You’re not making sense, love.’

‘Can’t you see?’ Eleanor grabs my chin and shakes it. I watch the reflection of my head wobble from side to side. ‘This is Queenie.’

I get a funny feeling in my stomach. What is she on about?

‘Of course it isn’t. This is Rosie, Nelly, and you know it. Don’t go saying daft things like that.’ She prises Eleanor’s fingers off my chin. I rub my jaw; I’m sure she’s left a bruise.

‘I know who we think she is, May, but look at her. Just look!’ Eleanor waves a hand in my direction and I duck out of the way before she can attack me again. ‘The clothes, the hair. All she needs is a coat of your Max Factor red lipstick and we have Queenie standing here again.’

I feel sick at the mention of the lipstick.

I look in the mirror again. Both of the old women are glaring at each other. However crazy they are, I prefer them to those strange girls. I don’t know where they came from, or who they are, and I hope I never see them again. What is it about this house that makes everything so flipping weird?

Gran lays a gentle hand on her sister’s shoulder. ‘Even if she does look a bit like her, it’s not Queenie, Nelly. If she was here, she’d be old like us now, wouldn’t she? This is my grand-daughter, Rosie, remember?’

‘Don’t treat me like an idiot. I know exactly who this is. But as you clearly won’t see what’s in front of your own eyes, we must agree to disagree.’ Great-aunt Eleanor is glaring at Gran who huffs a bit but doesn’t argue. Eleanor turns to look at me again. I want to squirm, but don’t dare. ‘Queenie caused a lot of upset in this house, and then disappeared without trace. Everyone said she was dead, but I wasn’t so sure. And you, young lady, look remarkably like her.’

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Gran shaking her head and looking upset.

‘I can’t help how I look,’ I say, my voice squeaking because Great-aunt Eleanor is so much like old Mrs Sparks when I haven’t done my History homework right. She’s always glaring at me over her glasses like Eleanor’s doing now. It’s so not fair. ‘You two dressed me up like this.’ I look back as calmly as I can. I’m still too frightened to blink. That seems to annoy Eleanor even more.

‘Yes we did.’ She turns away. ‘Has that kettle boiled yet, May? A woman can die of thirst around here waiting to be offered another cup of tea.’

As Great-aunt Eleanor stalks down the hall to the kitchen; Gran touches my cheek. ‘Don’t worry, love. Nelly’s feeling her age a bit.’ I nod. She must be right. Great-aunt Eleanor is even

older than Gran. ‘She gets confused sometimes,’ Gran goes on. ‘I think seeing you in that get-up made her think she was still a girl. I suppose Queenie did look a bit like you, but she’s long gone.’ Gran shakes her head. ‘So sad.’

I follow Gran into the kitchen, wondering what’s ‘so sad’ – what happened to the girl, or the fact that her sister has probably got dementia or something? Maybe I’m going mad too. I have no idea what just happened out there. Did I really see two girls where Gran and Eleanor should have been? If I was anywhere else but Gran’s house, I’d have said someone had was playing some sick joke with a trick mirror. But not here.

I feel shaky as I sit down at the kitchen table. The smell coming from the clothes doesn’t help. I hope I’m not going to throw up.

‘You all right, darlin’?’ asks Gran.

‘Yeah, I’m OK,’ I say, waving a hand in front of my face. ‘Mothballs. They’re making me feel a bit sick.’

‘I never did like that pong,’ says Gran with a sympathetic smile. ‘But you get used to it.’

‘Are you sure that’s all?’ asks Great-aunt Eleanor, eyeing me with distrust. ‘You’re looking decidedly peaky.’

I swallow hard, resisting the urge to blurt out what I think I’ve just seen. It’s all so freaky, I feel like crying. If I tell them about all the weird things that happen to me in this house, like the wallpaper and the mirror and stuff, they’ll probably think I’m on drugs or something.

‘I think I just need some fresh air,’ I say. ‘I’ve got to buy a phone charger anyway, so I’ll head over to Oxford Street.’

‘Good idea, love. You can get the bus from the end of the road. Takes you straight there.’

‘I’d better get changed,’ I say. ‘I don’t want to get these clothes dirty.’ And I don’t want to be seen in them in public. What if I see someone fit?

I head for the stairs, trying not to look in the hall-stand mirror as I pass. Big mistake. I’m so busy avoiding the mirror, I forget to breathe through my mouth and inhale a huge lungful of that awful mothball smell. I sneeze, hard, and then I can’t stop. With streaming eyes, I stumble and catch the heel of my

shoe on something. The next thing I know my head's slammed against the hall stand. I don't have a chance to call out before everything goes black.

CHAPTER THREE

What is going on?

I remember the smell of mothballs got so bad I started sneezing, and then I lost my balance in those stupid shoes. My head really hurts. Did I knock myself out? How stupid am I?

I open my eyes, but nothing happens. Seriously, everything is black. I can't see a thing. Oh my God – am I blind? How will I get my make-up right? I could end up looking like a panda and I wouldn't know. No, wait – I put a hand out. I'm caught in something. It feels rough, like a horse blanket, and it smells like one too. Ugh! It's revolting. Where the hell did that come from? I've got to get it off before I vomit. I start to pull it away from me and see a chink of light.

'Oi, you. Stay still,' a female voice orders. 'Ain't you done enough damage?'

I don't care, I'm getting this thing shifted at last! Yes! Result! But hang on a minute, who said that?

It's definitely not Gran or Great-aunt Eleanor. It's a girl's voice. How did she get in here? Did she chuck this over me? Maybe I didn't fall. Maybe she sneaked up and caught me by surprise. But now I'm on to her I can take another girl, I reckon. If I have to. And if she's thinking of hurting my Gran, then I definitely will have to. And where is Gran? I've got to make sure she's OK.

I pull harder. I've got to get this thing off me. I don't know who she is, but I'm ready for a fight. Gran's put the radio on in the kitchen, and obviously hasn't heard a thing. I could be being attacked at her own front door and the stupid old bat hasn't even noticed.

'I said stay still.' The girl thumps me on the back. 'For God's sake, you'll rip it.'

As if I bloody care. I move again and there's a tearing